The Light of Christmas: A Season of Giving and Grace

(With Crafts, Recipes, and Songs)

by Curtis Sergeant

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Chapter 1: The Pumpkin Porch Parade

Eli pressed his nose against the frosty front window, his breath fogging the glass. “They’re glowing already!” he whispered. Tina and Jason scrambled to the window beside him, eyes wide with wonder.

Lining the porch railings and steps were the Abrams family’s favorite tradition—carved pumpkins, lit from within like tiny lanterns. But these weren’t ordinary jack-o'-lanterns. Eli, who had learned the art from his mom, had spent weeks carving with little tools and a lot of care.

Tonight was December 1st, and while most houses on their street were switching from pumpkins to Christmas lights, the Abrams kept their pumpkin glow going into the Christmas season. “God gives us creative gifts all year,” their mom always said, “and pumpkins don’t stop being beautiful just because it’s December.”

Dad opened the front door and let in a swirl of crisp air. “Who’s ready for our Advent kickoff?” he asked with a grin.

The kids raced to the door. Grandma and Grandpa were already outside admiring the porch. Grandpa bent down near a large pumpkin carved with a fairy surrounded by stars. “This one looks like it flew in from a storybook,” he said, squinting through his glasses.

“That’s mine!” Tina said proudly, spinning on one foot. “She’s guarding the stars over our house!”

Nearby, Eli’s masterpiece stole the show: a glowing tree with little windows and a crooked door, carved right into the bark-like swirls. “It’s a tree house,” he explained, “like one where someone might live during a Bible-time journey—like Mary and Joseph!”

Jason wasn’t much for carving, but he loved picking pumpkins and giving them

names. “That one’s Mr. Mushy,” he said, pointing to a pumpkin with mushrooms and a moon. “Because he’s a mushroom and glows like the moon at night.”

Mom chuckled. “Speaking of glowing, we’ve got a new family Advent craft this year.”

“Ooh! What is it?” Tina asked, bouncing on her toes.

“It’s an olive oil candle,” Mom said, holding up a small glass jar. Inside, water and golden oil shimmered, and a simple wick floated at the top. “I read about this tradition from another part of the world—some families light one each night and talk about Jesus, the Light of the World.”

“Like the light shining in the darkness,” Eli said, thinking of the first chapter of John.

“Exactly,” Mom replied. “We’ll light one each night until Christmas. And maybe later we can learn where the idea came from.”

Grandma leaned in. “Can I help you make them? I used to light candles like this during power outages growing up.”

Dad herded everyone inside. “Let’s gather in the kitchen. We’ll do our first candle and read the beginning of Luke.”

They piled into the kitchen for cocoa and cookies. Mom carefully lit the jar. Its soft light danced across the kitchen ceiling.

Eli whispered, “It’s almost like the pumpkins are joining in.”

Eli softly sang the first line of the song they'd learned for Advent, Light of the World: “A candle is burning, its flame shining bright, It glows in the darkness and brings us His light…” Mom smiled and joined in as the flame steadied.

That night, after the candle flickered out and the younger kids were asleep, Eli returned to the porch with a sketchpad. He looked at some of his other pumpkins once more—the frog with dotty legs on a lily pad, and the fox surrounded by roses.

He didn't know yet what all these carvings meant for their Christmas. But he had a feeling—deep in his chest—that this December would be different. Bigger. Brighter.

The carvings weren't just decorations—they were little windows of worship. The song Grandma had taught them came to mind: Shine All Year. Eli wasn't sure why, but it made him smile.

Like a light in the dark.

Chapter 2: The Knock at the Door

The next morning, the kitchen was filled with the scent of cinnamon and toast. Jason sat cross-legged on the floor in his dinosaur pajamas, cradling a stuffed owl. Tina wore a sparkly tutu over her leggings, already planning a dance routine “for Jesus and the tree.”

Eli, as usual, was at the table with a pencil in hand, sketching a new pumpkin idea. This one featured two owls, with wide, glowing eyes and sleek wings tucked close. “I think it could be called ‘The Watchers,’” he said thoughtfully. “Like an angel watching the fields at night.”

Mom smiled and poured juice. “We’ll read about those angels later this month.”

Just then, the doorbell rang.

Everyone froze.

Visitors weren’t common in the early morning, especially not in December.

Dad opened the door, and a gust of cold air swept in. On the porch stood a woman with a bundled baby on her hip, a boy about Jason’s age clutching her coat, and a girl who looked about Tina’s size standing quietly behind her.

“Hi,” the woman said, her accent soft and careful. “I’m sorry to come so early. I heard this house was… a church family?”

Dad blinked, then smiled warmly. “You heard right. Come in out of the cold.”

Their names were Layla, Musa, Amira, and baby Sami. They had just arrived from overseas. “We came to stay with my cousin,” Layla said, “but he is now far away for work. We have a place to stay, but everything is new. I’m trying to find warm clothes and maybe a church.”

Jason brought his stuffed owl over. “This is Ollie. He likes new friends.”

Amira’s eyes lit up. She nodded shyly.

Soon, Tina and Amira were dancing in the living room, giggling like they’d known each other forever. “Want to help me make something?” Tina asked.

They spread out materials on the craft table. “Today,” Tina announced, “we’re making Christmas Star garlands!” She showed Amira how to fold shiny paper and string stars together with thread. “We’ll hang them over the fireplace and tell stories under them.”

“I like stars,” Amira said quietly. “We had many stars where I came from.”

Meanwhile, Eli was out on the porch, checking on the pumpkins. He adjusted the one with the bird carrying a flower. “You look peaceful,” he said aloud. Then he looked toward another one with a butterfly carved in gentle outline**.** It reminded him of quiet friendship.

Eli thought of Mary and Joseph, looking for a place to stay. He wondered if anyone had answered their knock the way Dad had answered Layla’s.

Inside, Grandpa finished reading Matthew 1, ending with: *“…and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means, God with us.”*

Jason whispered, “He’s with us. Even at breakfast time.”

That evening, as Layla and her children left with coats from the closet and a bag of groceries from the pantry, Eli noticed something: his pumpkins seemed to be glowing brighter than ever.

Chapter 3: The Light in the Window

The weather turned cold overnight, and a frost shimmered across the neighborhood roofs as Eli tugged on his flannel shirt. It was Saturday, and that meant pancakes—and more pumpkin carving.

Mom flipped the last pancake onto a plate and called out, “Time to clean up, then we’re heading to the community center!”

Tina groaned through a mouthful of syrup. “But I wanted to finish my Christmas Star garland!”

“You can bring it along,” Mom said with a smile. “There’s a craft table for younger kids. And Jason, don’t forget your hat.”

Jason wore his inside out, grinning as he galloped past the table. “Let’s go see Layla!”

At the center, the big windows were decorated with hand-cut snowflakes. A welcome banner read: "*Peace on Earth, Goodwill to All*." Several families had already arrived, some carrying bags, others boxes of donations.

Eli spotted Layla helping her mom set out small glass jars filled with what looked like water and oil. “What are those?” he asked.

Layla beamed. “They’re our candles. From Syria! We light them at night for Advent.”

Her mom, Rima, joined them. “In Syria, especially before the war, families would make these simple candles during December. You pour water in a glass, float a layer of olive oil on top, and set a wick in a tiny holder—it floats right between the oil and the water. Then, at sunset, we light it and place it in the window.”

“It’s so the light can be seen from the street,” Layla added. “To remind people that Jesus is the Light of the World.”

Tina, wide-eyed, whispered, “That’s beautiful.”

Jason pointed. “Can I light one?”

“Later tonight,” Mom promised. “Maybe we can make our own.”

The older kids were invited to the pumpkin gallery set up along the walls as the families mixed and chatted. Eli guided Layla and her younger brother Yusuf to his favorite carvings.

"This one's mine," he said proudly, gesturing to a snail crawling.

Layla pointed to a more intricate pumpkin. "I love this zebra! It looks as if it could walk right into the room!"

"It's called 'Zebra Dad,'" Eli explained. "Dad did that one."

Jason, who had wandered in after eating a cookie the size of his head, tugged Tina's sleeve. "Look! A snail! he said, crawling like the snail on the pumpkin.

Later that afternoon, the families gathered for a story. Grandpa took out his big Bible, his voice warm and steady. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light," he read from Isaiah. "On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned."

Rima smiled at Layla and Yusuf, and they looked at their glowing candles on the table.

"That's what this season is about," Grandpa continued. "Jesus came to bring light into our lives, just like these candles."

Back at home that evening, Eli and Mom set up a row of little jars on the windowsill. "It's peaceful," she said softly as she lit the first flame. "And simple. But so full of meaning."

Dad adjusted one of the pumpkins outside to face the window. "Now, anyone walking by will see the light."

Jason climbed into Tina's lap on the couch. "Can we do this every year?"

"Yes," Tina whispered, holding him close. "Every year."

Outside, the candles in a pumpkin flickered in the dark, a tiny beacon of hope—and the first of many lights to come.

Chapter 4: Starry Surprises

By the second week of December, the Abrams' house started to smell like cinnamon, orange peels, and just a hint of pine needles. The Christmas tree had been decorated over the weekend—Jason called it "the sparkle tree" and insisted on putting all the soft ornaments in one clumpy cluster near the bottom.

Eli was sitting at the kitchen table, working on a new pumpkin design: a horse. "This one's for the wise men," he told Mom. "I thought maybe they might have used horses instead of the camels that everyone usually draws."

Mom kissed the top of his head. "I love that idea. Let's read about them tonight."

At the living room craft table, Tina was teaching Amira how to make cinnamon star ornaments with applesauce and glue. "They smell like Christmas," Tina declared. "And you can hang them on a tree or give them away."

"I want to give one to Mrs. Kemp," Amira said. "She let me borrow her crayons."

"Perfect," Tina said. "That's generosity. That's Christmas."

Meanwhile, Layla and Rima had joined Mom in the kitchen to prepare a recipe from home. "This one's called *ma'amoul,*" Layla said, holding up a round cookie press. "We use dates and nuts inside. We make them at holidays—especially Easter and Christmas. It's a way of remembering joy even after hardship."

"That's beautiful," Mom said. "Would you be willing to show the recipe at our Christmas Eve potluck?"

Layla nodded eagerly. "Yes! I think… we're starting to feel like this is home."

Jason, nose pressed to the patio glass, shouted, "Dad's back with more pumpkins!"

Indeed, Dad was dragging a wagon filled with the last of the season's finds—some short and squat, some tall and ridged. "These should get us through to Christmas," he said.

Eli picked one with a flat face and got to work right away. "This one's going to have a star," he said. "But I'm going to try something different. Just a starfish that has dots that look like stars."

Jason reached into the wagon and grabbed a tiny pumpkin, no bigger than a grapefruit. "This one's Baby Jesus," he said solemnly.

That evening, with soft Christmas music playing and a new olive oil candle lit in the window, Grandma opened her Bible to Matthew 2. She read about the magi and the star they had followed.

Eli's eyes drifted toward the candlelight and then to his carving—the new one with a starfish with little dots that looked like stars. It reminded him of the magi's star.

"Do you think they were scared?" he asked aloud.

"Who?" Grandpa asked.

"The wise men. I mean… they traveled really far, just following a star."

Grandpa closed the Bible gently. "I think they were brave. And I think they were hopeful. Like people who light candles in the dark."

Out on the porch, their pumpkins flickered gently. Among them now were a galloping horse in the desert wind, and a cross made of squiggly lines.

That night, as the children went to bed, the house glowed not just with lights—but with welcome, and warmth, and something deeper.

Something like worship.

Chapter 5: Snowflakes and Surprises

The next day, the kids woke up to a sound rarely heard in their Southeastern town—silence. No birds chirping. No cars rushing past.

Then Tina screamed from the hallway, “It’s SNOWING!”

Eli bolted to the window. Sure enough, a thin blanket of powdery white covered the yard. Jason ran in, socks sliding on the floor. “I saw a snowflake land on the porch railing! It was spiky. Like a starfish. But cold.”

Grandpa chuckled as he sipped his coffee. “Better enjoy it while it lasts. Around here, it could melt before lunch.”

Dad clapped his hands. “Snow day! I vote we make something beautiful before it disappears.”

“Let’s make snowflakes!” Tina declared. “The kind that don’t melt.”

They gathered paper, scissors, and string, then set up shop at the dining table. “These are like prayers,” Grandma said as she folded and snipped. “Each one is different. And each one brings joy.”

Jason tried to cut a snowflake but ended up with something that looked more like a blob with legs. “Mine is a jellyfish,” he announced proudly. “A Christmas jellyfish!”

As snow fell softly outside, Eli worked on his next pumpkin: an elk that looked like it was leaping in snow. He shaded the background with careful etching to make the snow glow brighter. “This one feels cold,” he said.

Mom nodded. “That’s why we light candles, to bring a feeling of warmth.”

Tina had helped Amira carve a smaller pumpkin with a pattern of stars and flowers. “We made it together,” she said. “We call it ‘Friendship Blooming.’”

Meanwhile, Layla and Mom were in the kitchen, baking. “These are *barazek*,” Layla explained. “Sesame cookies. We make them in Syria around Christmas.” She offered one to Tina, who took a big bite and then closed her eyes.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Layla laughed. “I’ll show you how to bake them the next time I visit.”

Later that evening, as the sun set, the family gathered around the living room. Eli lit the olive oil candle. Its gentle flame reflected in the window beside a new pumpkin carved with a butterfly with a star on each wing.

Dad opened to Philippians and read: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.”*

Jason leaned against Tina. “Like sharing snowflakes. And cookies. And your markers.”

“Even jellyfish pumpkins,” Tina added, ruffling his hair.

Outside, the snow had started to melt, but the soft glow of the porch pumpkins remained. Among them were the elk, the star flowers, and the butterfly, frozen not in cold, but in hope.

And across the street, one of the neighbors had placed a candle in their window, too.

Chapter 6: The Gift in the Garage

The following week was a whirlwind of activity—choir rehearsals, school projects, grocery lists, and mysterious boxes arriving at the front door. But on Wednesday afternoon, a storm rolled in, and everything slowed down.

“I guess our caroling night is postponed,” Dad said, peeking out at the rain. “But that means we finally have time for... the garage.”

The children groaned in unison.

The garage was the kingdom of cobwebs and half-used paint cans. But somewhere in its shadows lived the family’s box of old Christmas decorations.

With flashlights and jackets, they trudged into the cold. Jason pretended his light was a search beam and shouted, “We’re on a secret mission!”

Eli and Tina helped Dad move a stack of crates. Underneath was a dusty bin labeled: NATIVITY. Inside were chipped ceramic figures—Mary, Joseph, a sleepy cow, and a baby Jesus with one ear missing.

“I forgot we had this!” Mom said, brushing off a donkey.

“Can we paint them?” Tina asked.

“With care,” Dad said. “Let’s give them a fresh start.”

Back inside, the kids took their time, using fine brushes and quiet hands. “I like that they’re a little broken,” Eli said. “Like… they’ve been through stuff.”

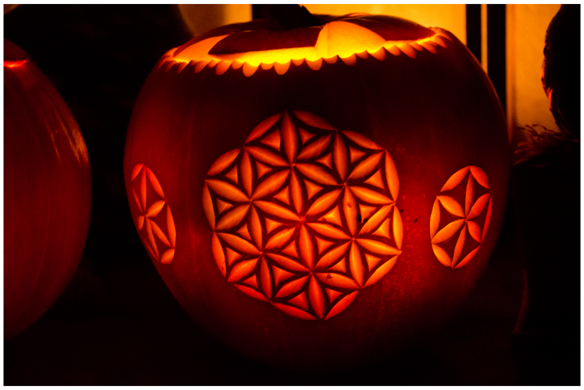
Mom smiled. “Kind of like the people in the story.”

Jason had the job of painting the manger hay. “Baby Jesus gets golden straw,” he declared.

Meanwhile, Grandma was making cocoa and setting out gingerbread dough. “Let’s make nativity cookies,” she said. “Everyone gets to decorate one person or animal.”

Tina sculpted a camel with a blanket of icing and tiny candy stars. Eli crafted a wise man with a crown made of pretzel pieces. Jason made a goat with jellybean eyes. It was questionable—but adorable.

Later that night, the family lit their olive oil candle and gathered near the fireplace, where the freshly painted nativity now sat under a string of paper stars.



Eli placed a new pumpkin on the hearth. It showed geometric shapes.

“Look,” Jason whispered. “They’re glowing.”

Grandpa opened to Luke 2 and read slowly: *“And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger…”*

As the words settled over them, Mom looked around the room. “What does everyone think it means that Jesus came as a baby?”

Layla, who had come by to drop off cookies and stayed for the reading, spoke quietly. “Maybe… it means we don’t have to be powerful for God to be close. Just open.”

Jason tilted his head. “Like a garage door?”

Everyone laughed.

“That works,” Grandpa said. “An open door. An open heart.”

Outside, the rain had stopped. The night was clear, and the pumpkins on the porch glowed brighter than ever. Among them was a new one—a cat.

And in the quiet, Jason looked out the window and whispered, “Welcome home, Jesus.”

Chapter 7: Music in the Air

By the third Sunday of Advent, the neighborhood was twinkling. Lights hung from gutters, wreaths were on doors, and even the Abrams' pumpkins had a touch of snow glitter thanks to an early morning frost.

But inside, it was music that filled the house.

"Today's the church music festival," Tina announced at breakfast. "I'm singing with the kids' choir!"

"You sure are," Mom said, handing her a honey toast shaped like a star. "And we're all going to be there cheering."

Jason banged on the table with a spoon. "I wanna sing!"

"You're still learning the words, buddy," Eli said. "You can sing from the pew."

The festival was held that afternoon in the church sanctuary, warm and filled with poinsettias and laughter. Children in red sweaters and gold bow ties shuffled nervously in front of the altar. Tina stood tall in the front row, her braids bouncing with excitement.

The kids' choir sang "Go Tell It on the Mountain," and "Away in a Manger." Tina beamed the entire time.

Later, the older children sang "Silent Night" by candlelight. The room went quiet as one flame passed from person to person, lighting up faces with peace.

Afterward, the Abrams kids helped serve cider and cookies in the fellowship hall. Layla and her family were there too, passing out *barazek* and gingerbread stars.

Tina gave Amira a big hug. "You were so brave to come!"

"You were brave to sing," Amira replied, her eyes shining.

Meanwhile, Eli had brought one of his pumpkins to display beside the refreshment table.

It showed delicate flowers. He set it beside a carving of an angel.

A few people stopped to admire it, and the beautiful angel.

"Your pumpkin is beautiful," the pastor said. "It looks good beside the angel. You know, in the Bible, angels often appear when something important is about to happen."

Eli nodded. “I think this one is announcing peace.”

Back at home that evening, the kids were still humming carols as they set out their next craft—homemade pinecone bird feeders. “It’s for the birds, since they don’t get cookies,” Jason said, carefully smearing peanut butter onto his pinecone.

“God takes care of the sparrows,” Grandpa added. “We get to help.”

Eli finished one last pumpkin before bed. This one showed a house with a tree and a dog beneath a sky filled with clouds. He placed it beside another flower carving and smiled.

Jason whispered, “That makes me want to sing, too.”

And in the stillness of that Advent night, the pumpkins flickered like quiet voices. Like tiny trumpets. Like a chorus of light.

Chapter 8: The Unexpected Guest

The week before Christmas was always busy, but this year felt especially full. The house was decorated, the porch was glowing with pumpkins, and the Advent candles flickered each evening in the window. Even Jason had stopped trying to blow them out, most of the time.

One evening, as the sun began to set, the family gathered in the kitchen. Mom had set out the ingredients for a new recipe.

"We're making khubz, a type of flatbread," she said. "Layla's family gave us the recipe—it's simple, warm, and meant to be shared."

Jason was mostly interested in the dough. "Can I squish it?"

"You must," Layla laughed, arriving just in time to help. "The dough listens better after you squish it."

While the bread baked, Eli worked on another pumpkin. This one was more abstract—cascading lines coming down from the top and up from the bottom. "It's supposed to feel like peace," he said. "Like the way the house feels right now."

"Peaceful and yeasty," Grandpa added, sniffing the air.

Tina was at the craft table again, this time with Amira and Grandma. They were making salt dough nativity ornaments, rolling out stars, hearts, and tiny baby mangers. "These are gifts," Tina said. "For people who need to remember God loves them."

Just then, the doorbell rang.

Eli opened it to find a man standing there, soaked from the cold drizzle, holding a toolbox.

"Sorry," the man said. "I'm fixing the gutters next door. Slipped on the ladder and… well, I think I twisted my ankle. Could I use your phone?"

"Of course," Dad said, hurrying him inside.

As Mom wrapped a towel around his shoulders and Grandpa brought over an ice pack, Jason leaned close and whispered, "Is he going to stay for dinner?"

"He might," Tina whispered back.

The man's name was Roy. He had a gentle voice and tired eyes. As the bread came out of the oven, Mom set an extra place at the table.

"This is the best-smelling rescue I've had all year," Roy said, laughing softly.

That night, Roy listened quietly as Grandpa read from Luke: *"Because there was no room for them in the inn."*

Eli looked around the table—at Layla's family, at Roy, at the steaming bread in the center—and wondered what would've happened if Joseph had knocked on their door instead.

He remembered the song they had sung just days before: "Welcome Him In." That night, it didn't feel like a song; it felt like their home.

After dinner, Roy stood and shook everyone's hands. "Thank you. You gave a stranger a seat at your table. That's something I won't forget."

When he left, Eli lit the olive oil candle and set a new pumpkin beside it: a smiley face. It made him smile every time he looked at it.

Tina leaned her head on Eli's shoulder. "I think Jesus came to our house tonight."

Eli didn't answer right away. He just smiled and nodded, watching another new butterfly pumpkin glow.

Chapter 9: Christmas Eve Eve

The day before Christmas Eve was filled with errands, giggles, and just a little bit of glitter in everyone's hair.

"We need to finish wrapping the last few gifts," Mom called out.

"We need more tape!" Eli shouted from under a pile of tissue paper.

Tina was in charge of bows, which meant everything—even Jason—ended up with a sparkly red loop on top. "You're a present now," she said, plopping a bow on his head.

"I'm a Christmas lion!" Jason roared, spinning in circles.

That afternoon, the family packed up cookies, star ornaments, and warm scarves into gift bags for the neighbors. Tina and Amira carried bags up and down the street, ringing doorbells and singing short bursts of "Joy to the World."

At one house, an elderly man opened the door slowly. "What's this?" he asked, surprised.

"A gift," Amira said shyly. "For Christmas."

He held the bag in his hands for a long moment before whispering, "Thank you. You made my day."

Back at home, Eli had set up a folding table in the garage as a last-minute "carving station." He was working on a pumpkin that showed the hands of a man and woman holding hands. "It reminds me of you and mom," he said, "and of Joseph and Mary."

Next to him, Dad was carving something more playful: a boy sitting on the moon, fishing. "This one's for the kids," Dad said. "A little bit of whimsy is fun sometimes."

Inside, Grandma was helping the kids make one last simple craft: glittered prayer jars. "We'll each write a prayer or a thank-you note to God and put it in," she explained. "Then shake the jar and watch it sparkle."

"I'm thankful for warm bread," Jason wrote. "And frogs. And Jesus."

Eli slipped his folded paper into his jar without saying a word.

After dinner, Layla's family came by with a gift for the Abrams—a small hand-painted ornament shaped like a heart. "In Syria," Rima said, "we give something homemade to those who welcome us. You have done that."

Mom hugged her tightly. "We've been blessed by you, more than you know."

That night, the olive oil candle flickered beside the two new pumpkin carvings, which sat in the window next to it.

Grandpa read again from Luke: *"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.'"*

The children listened with wide eyes.

"They must have been amazed," Tina whispered.

"They must have been afraid," Eli added.

"They must have felt… chosen," Layla said softly.

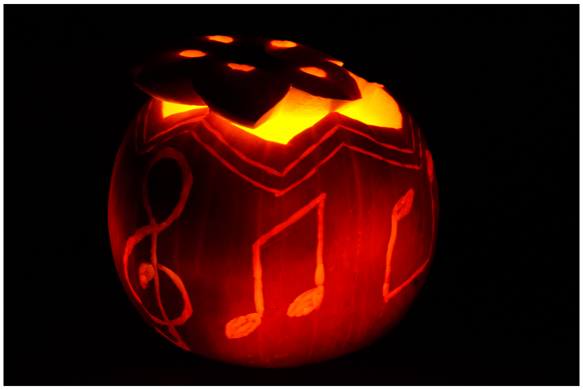
And in the stillness of that Christmas Eve Eve, surrounded by light and prayer and the scent of cinnamon and pine, every heart in the room felt full.

Chapter 10: The Christmas Eve Candlelight

The house was unusually quiet on Christmas Eve morning.

Not sleepy—just still.

Like everyone was holding their breath, waiting for something wonderful to begin.



Eli sat at the kitchen table, polishing the last of his pumpkins. This one was his simplest yet: musical notes. “It’s the song the angels sang when Jesus was born,” he said. “It means He’s here.”

Jason was curled up on the couch with Ollie the owl. “Is it tonight?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Mom said, kneeling beside him. “Jesus was born into a dark and waiting world. And tonight, we remember.”

At lunchtime, the family delivered a final round of gifts: handmade salt dough ornaments, jars of cookie mix, and star jars. They even dropped one off at Roy’s worksite, where he grinned and held up his still-bandaged ankle.

“Best sprain I ever had,” he joked.

Back at home, they began preparations for the candlelight service at church. Jason wore a sweater with a reindeer playing the drums. Tina insisted on a sparkly dress “because Jesus deserves sparkle.”

As the sun set, the sanctuary filled with quiet excitement. The pews were full, the air warm with candle wax and evergreen.

The service began with music, then Scripture, and then silence. One by one, candles were lit and passed along the aisles. When it was Eli’s turn, he turned and lit Tina’s with steady hands.

The room glowed.

The world glowed.

When the final verse of “Silent Night” ended, the congregation began to rise. But Pastor Sam raised his hand gently.

“We’ve had one special addition this year,” he said. “Eli Abrams, age nine, brought something for us to see.”

Everyone turned as Eli carried a small table to the front. On it was the musical notes pumpkin, glowing with a steady light.

“It’s for Jesus,” Eli said simply. “Because He is the Light and He causes us to sing.”

Afterward, people came up to thank him. Layla’s mom hugged him with tears in her eyes. “In our country, this is what we would do—place the light where all can see.”

Tina squeezed Eli’s hand. “You made Christmas brighter.”

That night, back at home, the family gathered around their own candle, an olive oil flame in a clear glass jar. The lights were off, and the glow reflected in the faces of everyone around the table.

Grandpa prayed, “Thank You for coming to us, Lord Jesus. Thank You for being our Light.”

Outside, the pumpkins lined the porch as they always had. But now, each one felt like a step in a journey toward Bethlehem, toward welcome, toward wonder.

Chapter 11: Christmas Morning

Sunlight peeked through the curtains, and for once, the house didn't stir with the usual Christmas morning chaos. It was as if everyone wanted to savor the silence just a little longer.

Then came the whisper.

"Is it morning?"

Jason's voice.

Then the shout.

"IT'S CHRISTMAS MORNING!"

Suddenly, the house was alive. Slippers padded down hallways, sleepy eyes blinked open, and the smell of warm cinnamon filled the air. Stockings were opened with squeals of delight—simple treasures, small candies, handmade notes from one sibling to another.

Eli found a hand-drawn card from Tina tucked into his stocking. It had a picture of a pumpkin with wings and a halo and the words: *To the Best Big Brother Artist*. He smiled and tucked it into his sketchbook.

Downstairs, Layla and her family arrived carrying a tray of warm *barazek* and a dish of honey-sweetened rice. "It is our tradition," Rima said, "to share our best food on the day of greatest joy."

Jason tugged Amira over to the living room tree. "We saved the star for you," he said. Together, they placed it on top, and everyone cheered.

Later, after breakfast and scattered wrapping paper, the family gathered for one last special moment. In the center of the living room, on a table draped in white, sat a pumpkin carved as a right-side-up pineapple. Mom said, "Here in the South, a pineapple like this represents hospitality, welcome, and friendship. We are blessed when we practice these things. Think about how much we have enjoyed Layla's family and Roy."

Eli lit a candle inside.

"This one is for today," he said. "Because He's not just a baby. He's our King, and He has welcomed us!"

Grandpa opened to Revelation and read: *"They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."*

No one spoke for a moment.

Then Mom said, "He came as a baby. But He came to reign, and to make us His friends."

"And to save us," Dad added gently.

Jason nodded solemnly. "And to like cookies."

They laughed, and Tina handed around cups of warm cider. "Let's toast," she said, raising her cup high. "To Jesus. To light. To home."

As they clinked their cups, Eli looked around the room—at his family, Layla and her children, and the glowing pineapple pumpkin crowned in light—and felt his heart swell with something deeper than excitement.

Joy.

Outside, the porch pumpkins flickered one more time, their light mingling with the golden rays of the Christmas morning sun.

Chapter 12: Light into the New Year

The Christmas decorations were still up, though the cookies were mostly gone, and the last of the *barazek* had mysteriously vanished after Jason's bedtime snack. The pumpkins on the porch had held up surprisingly well, their glow dimmer now, but still soft and welcoming.

It was New Year's Day.

The family gathered in the living room after breakfast, still in pajamas. The fire crackled, and the windows fogged gently from the cold outside.

"Does anyone have resolutions?" Dad asked, sipping his coffee.

"I want to be braver," Tina said.

"I want to try a backflip," Jason announced. "Off the couch."

"No," Mom said immediately.

"I want to make something beautiful every week," Eli added, looking down at his sketchpad.

"Those are all good," Grandpa said. "Let's make one together, too—something we can all do."

"Like what?" Tina asked.

"Let's choose to be light," Grandma said. "Wherever we go."

Everyone nodded.

As the morning sun poured in through the window, they started putting together some more star jars, decorated with words like 'Hope,' 'Peace,' and 'Jesus.'

"We can give them away," Tina said. "Like secret light messengers!"

Jason made one that just said "Cookies," which he insisted was part of the fruit of the Spirit.

Later that afternoon, Layla's family joined them for a walk in the park. The air was crisp, the grass damp with frost, and the sun sat low in the sky. They brought along two final pumpkins—an eagle, and a new flower.

"These two are for the whole world," Eli explained, setting them carefully at the base of a tree near the trail. "Because Jesus came for everyone. Also, they look at home here."

They lit a small candle inside and stood quietly as it flickered.

Tina turned to Amira. "What's your resolution?"

Amira thought for a moment. "To invite someone else."

"Like we invited you?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes."

That night, back at home, they lit their final olive oil candle and placed it in the front window. Around it were small cinnamon stars, glitter jars, and dozens of carved pumpkins, still glowing faintly, each with a story.

Grandpa opened his Bible one more time and read: *"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."*

As the candle flickered, Eli turned to Tina and whispered, "Let's keep the light going."

She grinned. "All year?"

"All year."

Epilogue: The Light That Stayed

That night, long after the sun had gone down and the neighborhood was quiet again, Eli sat on the porch bundled in his blanket, sketchpad in hand. The pumpkins still lined the railing—faded now, a little softer, but still beautiful.

He looked at each one like an old friend.

Every glowing carving was part of the story they had lived this December. A story of new friends, open doors, laughter, prayer, and light.

The front door creaked open, and Tina stepped out beside him. She was holding a small lantern—the one she had decorated that morning. It said, *Hope* in shiny letters.

"Want to walk with me?" she asked.

Eli nodded. Together, they walked to the end of the driveway and placed the lantern near the sidewalk. It glowed gently, even in the cold.

"Someone might see it," Tina said. "Someone who needs light."

"Yeah," Eli whispered. "That's the whole thing, isn't it?"

Tina tilted her head.

"Jesus didn't just come for December," he said. "He came for every day after, too."

She smiled and nodded. "Let's remember."

Jason peeked through the window just then and knocked on the window with both hands. His "Cookies" lantern was glowing too.

Eli laughed. "Well, maybe not every tradition has to last…"

But in his heart, he knew something had changed.

Christmas had carved something into them. Not just into pumpkins or paper snowflakes—but into their hearts.

A pattern of light.

A habit of welcome.

A rhythm of giving.

And as the new year stretched out before them—twelve whole months of ordinary days—they knew what to do.

They would carve beauty where they could.

They would open their door.

They would light the candle.

All year long.

Crafts & Recipes

Pumpkin Carving

Materials:

- Pumpkin(s)
- Carving tools or pumpkin carving kit
- Spoon or scoop
- Bowl (for collecting seeds)
- Printed stencil or paper and pencil (optional)
- Battery-operated tea light or candle (optional)

Instructions:

1. Choose a fresh, firm pumpkin.
2. Cut a circle around the stem to create a lid and remove it.
3. Scoop out seeds and pulp; scrape inner walls to 1-inch thick.
4. Draw or trace your design onto the pumpkin.
5. Carve using small serrated tools. You can cut completely through the rind and the pulp of the pumpkin to create windows to let out light, or you can cut away the rind, but leave some of the pulp, which is translucent. The thickness of the remaining pulp determines how brightly light can shine through. Thinner areas are brighter.
6. Place a battery-operated tea light or candle inside and replace the lid. If there are no holes in the pumpkin and you are using a candle, you will need to leave the lid off so the candle can get oxygen.

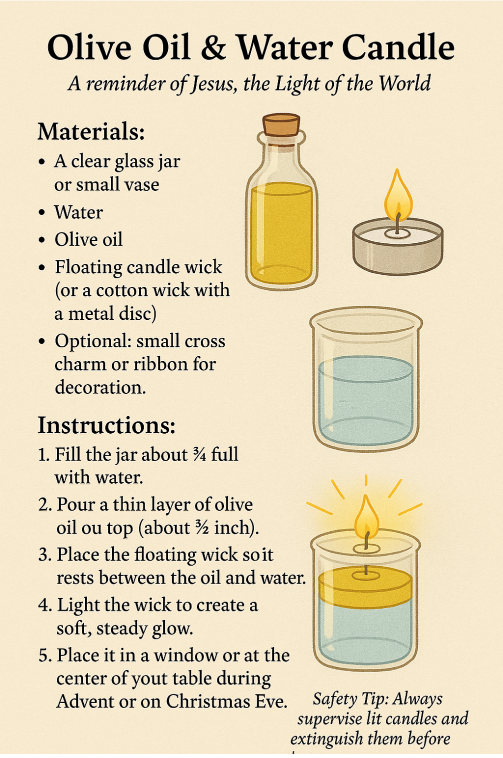
Olive Oil and Water Candle

Materials:

- Small glass jar or bowl (short and wide works best)
- Olive oil
- Water
- Food coloring (optional)
- Floating wick
- Toothpick or skewer (for positioning the wick)

Instructions:

7. Pour water into the glass jar until it is about ¾ full.
8. Add a few drops of food coloring to the water if desired and stir gently.
9. Slowly pour about ¼ inch of olive oil over the water.
10. Place a store-bought floating wick on the oil.
11. Light the wick and enjoy the gentle glow.



Christmas Star Garlands

Materials:

- Construction paper or cardstock
- Star-shaped cookie cutters or templates
- Scissors
- Hole punch
- String or yarn
- Markers, stickers, glitter (optional)

Instructions:

1. Trace and cut out stars from paper.
2. Decorate each star with drawings, Bible verses, or kind words.
3. Punch a hole in each star.
4. Thread stars onto a string to create a garland.
5. Hang across a wall or window.

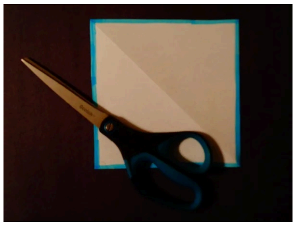
Paper Snowflakes

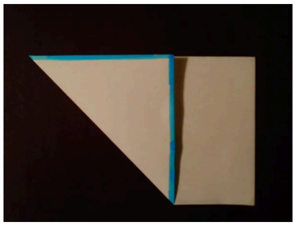
Materials:

- White or colored paper (square)
- Scissors
- Pencil (optional)
- Glitter or stickers (optional)

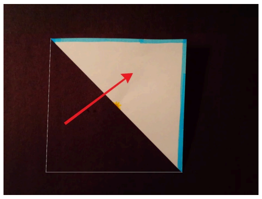
Instructions:

1. Start with a square. I have outlined the edges of my paper in blue to make it easier to follow along with the steps. As I fold, I keep the paper in place, so you shouldn't need to rotate or flip over the paper to follow along (unless otherwise stated). Just fold it exactly as it shows. (TO MAKE A SQUARE: You can make a square from a rectangular piece of paper simply by folding one corner down to form an isosceles triangle and trimming off the excess paper. See second picture.) I usually make two snowflakes for every 8.5"x11" piece of paper, so I first cut the paper in half, and then make a square from each half. This makes a snowflake about 5" across. If you're just learning to make snowflakes, using a full piece of paper for each snowflake may be easier to practice with.

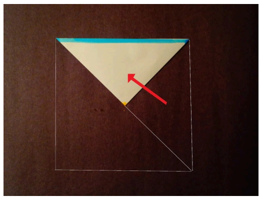




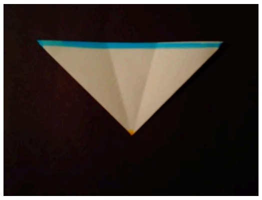
2. Fold in half diagonally. Fold the square of paper diagonally to make a triangle. (Note that I have marked the center of the paper square with a yellow star, as well as outlines of what the paper looked like before it was folded. This is just to help make a reference point for following along.)



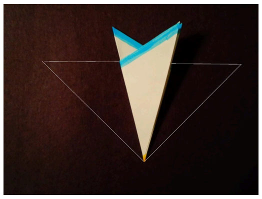
3. Fold in half again. Fold this larger triangle in half to make a smaller triangle.



4. Fold in thirds. Imagine this triangle in thirds (as shown in the first picture), and then fold the right "third" over, as shown in the second picture. If you want to be precise and have a protractor, each "third" in this step is a 30 degree angle.



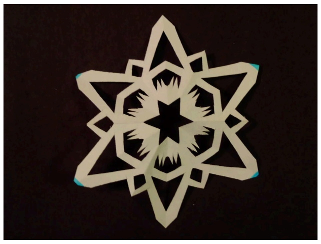
5. Fold again. Fold the left third over. Try to get all of the folds to line up as close as possible for the most symmetrical snowflake.



6. Cut the "top" off at an angle. Flip your folded paper over so that you're looking at the back. Then, cut off the top of the paper at an angle. Make sure to cut if off so that all remaining layers of paper are equal. As you can see, I'm basically cutting off all of those excess blue edges. Cutting at an angle is what makes the points of the snowflake. Eventually, you'll learn to cut at different angles to make snowflakes with points that are more or less sharp.

7. Shape it. This is where your imagination comes in. Begin cutting away from the sides of the paper. Usually, cutting small triangles from the sides is easiest, but don't forget to try other shapes. Be careful not to cut all the way from one side to the other, or else you'll chop your snowflake in half! In this particular snowflake, I cut the top edge (that original angle that we chopped off) to make the points turn out differently, I added some spiky cuts around the middle there, and I snipped off the very bottom at an angle (which will make a star shape in the middle of the finished snowflake). I don't use patterns for my snowflakes: I just cut as I go. My snowflakes are never the same because I don't usually plan out my snowflakes. Sometimes I find a new cut or shape that I like, and I may use the same technique on a different snowflake, but I don't copy the whole snowflake.

8. Unfold carefully to reveal the snowflake. The snowflake will not lay flat right away, so I like to tuck them between the pages of a book for a while before displaying them. I have also ironed them (between two pieces of plain paper) to make them extra flat. Watch out though, because paper can get very hot to the touch when ironed (don't use steam!) so be sure to let it cool for a second before handling the paper, and as always excercise caution to avoid fire and burns. Ironing them also seems to make them a tiny bit stiffer, which could be good if you want to hang them rather than tape them to a surface.



9. Decorate if desired.

10. Tape to windows or string together as a garland.

*These instructions were adapted from ReadsInTrees in LivingChristmas.

Cinnamon Star Ornaments

Materials:

- 1 cup applesauce
- 1 cup ground cinnamon
- Mixing bowl
- Rolling pin
- Star-shaped cookie cutters
- Ribbon or twine
- Drinking straw (for poking holes)

Instructions:

1. Mix applesauce and cinnamon into a dough.
2. Roll out dough to ¼ inch thickness.
3. Cut out stars with cookie cutters.
4. Poke a hole in each with the drinking straw.
5. Air dry for 24–48 hours or bake at 200°F for 2 hours.
6. Thread ribbon through the hole and hang.

Barazek (Sesame Cookies)

<u>Materials:</u>

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp baking powder
- ¼ tsp salt
- ½ cup crushed pistachios
- ¾ cup toasted sesame seeds
- ¼ cup honey (warmed slightly)

<u>Instructions:</u>

1. Cream butter and sugar.
2. Mix in dry ingredients.
3. Roll into 1-inch balls and flatten.
4. Dip one side in pistachios, the other in honey then sesame seeds.
5. Bake at 350°F for 15–18 minutes.
6. Cool and serve.

Gingerbread Nativity Cookies

Ingredients:

For the cookies:

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup brown sugar (packed)
- ¾ cup molasses
- 1 egg
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1 tbsp ground ginger
- 1 tbsp ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp ground cloves
- ½ tsp salt

For decorating:

- Tube frosting (white, yellow, brown, etc.)
- Raisins, mini chocolate chips, or candy pieces for eyes and decorations
- Cookie cutters (nativity-themed: star, baby, angel, donkey, etc.) or printed templates and knife

Instructions:

1. Make the dough: In a large bowl, beat the butter and brown sugar until creamy. Add the molasses and egg; mix well.

2. Mix dry ingredients: In a separate bowl, combine flour, baking soda, salt, and spices. Gradually add to the wet ingredients until a soft dough forms.

3. Chill: Divide the dough into two balls, flatten slightly, and wrap in plastic. Chill for at least 1 hour.

4. Preheat and prep: Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Line baking sheets with parchment paper.

5. Roll and cut: On a floured surface, roll the dough to about ¼ inch thick. Use nativity-themed cookie cutters—or paper templates and a knife—to cut out shapes.

6. Bake: Bake cookies for 8–10 minutes, or until edges are firm. Let cool completely on a wire rack.

7. Decorate: Use tube icing to add details, such as swaddling baby Jesus or adding halos and stars.

8. Display or eat: Arrange cookies in a nativity scene before serving, or gift them as a homemade Christmas treat.

Spiced Hot Cider

Materials:

- 1 quart apple cider or juice
- 1 orange, sliced
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 4 whole cloves
- 2 star anise (optional)
- 1-inch fresh ginger (optional)
- Honey or maple syrup (optional)

Instructions:

1. Combine all ingredients in a pot.
2. Simmer gently for 15–20 minutes.
3. Add sweetener to taste.
4. Serve hot in mugs.
5. Optional: Heat in slow cooker on low for 2–3 hours.

Pinecone Bird Feeders

Materials:

- Large, open pinecones
- Peanut butter
- Birdseed
- Butter knife or spoon
- Shallow dish or plate
- String or twine
- Wax paper (optional, for workspace protection)

Instructions:

1. Prepare your area: Lay down wax paper or newspaper to keep your workspace clean.

2. Attach the string: Tie a piece of string or twine securely around the top of each pinecone, creating a loop for hanging.

3. Spread peanut butter: Use a butter knife or spoon to spread peanut butter all over the pinecone, pressing it into the crevices.

4. Roll in birdseed: Pour birdseed into a shallow dish. Roll the sticky pinecone in the seed until it’s well-coated.

5. Set and chill (optional): Place finished feeders on wax paper and let them set for a bit (you can even refrigerate them for 10–15 minutes to firm them up).

6. Hang outside: Hang the bird feeders on a tree branch or hook where birds can enjoy them.

Khubz Flatbread (Honey-Wheat) for Sharing

Materials:

- 2 cups whole wheat flour
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2¼ tsp active dry yeast
- 1 cup warm water
- ¼ cup honey
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp salt

Instructions:

1. Activate yeast with warm water and honey.
2. Add flours, oil, and salt to form dough.
3. Knead 8–10 minutes and let rise 1 hour.
4. Shape, place in loaf pan, and rise again.
5. Bake at 350°F for 30–35 minutes.
6. Cool and share with someone in need.

Salt Dough Ornaments

Materials:

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup salt
- ¾ cup warm water (plus more if needed)
- Mixing bowl
- Rolling pin
- Cookie cutters (Christmas shapes)
- Straw or toothpick (for making hanging holes)
- Baking sheet & parchment paper
- Acrylic paint or markers (optional, for decorating)
- Ribbon or twine (for hanging)
- Clear sealer (optional)

Instructions:

1. Mix the dough: In a mixing bowl, combine flour and salt. Gradually add warm water, stirring until a dough forms. If it's too dry, add water a tablespoon at a time.

2. Knead: Knead the dough on a floured surface for 5–7 minutes until smooth.

3. Roll out: Roll the dough to about ¼ inch thickness.

4. Cut shapes: Use cookie cutters to make ornament shapes.

5. Add hanging holes: Use a straw or toothpick to poke a hole near the top of each ornament.

6. Bake: Place ornaments on a parchment-lined baking sheet and bake at 250°F (120°C) for 2 hours, or until completely dry and hard. Flip halfway through if needed.

7. Cool and decorate: Once cool, decorate with paint or markers. Optionally seal with clear varnish for durability.

8. Add ribbon: Thread ribbon or twine through the holes and hang on the tree or around the house.

Light-in-the-Dark Star Jar

Materials:

- Clean a mason jar or a glass container
- Glow-in-the-dark paint or stickers
- Small paintbrush
- Paper stars or star stickers (optional)

Instructions:

1. Dot glow paint inside jar like a starry sky.
2. Add star stickers or small paper stars inside the jar.
3. Let it charge under a light source.
4. Use at night as a comforting glow.

Songs of Light and Welcome

Light of the World

(Tune: Away in a Manger)

Key: F Major | Time Signature: 3/4 | Tempo: ~72 bpm

Verse 1
A candle is burning, its flame shining bright,
It glows in the darkness and brings us His light.
The Light of the whole world was born Christmas night—
Our Savior, Lord Jesus, our joy and our Light.

Verse 2
No crib and no pillow, no palace or bed,
But starlight and stillness shone over His head.
The shepherds all hurried to see such a sight,
And knelt down in wonder at Jesus, the Light.

Verse 3
So now we remember with candles and song,
That Jesus still leads us and loves all along.
We carry His brightness through each day and night—
The world may be dark, but we walk in His Light.

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F    A    C    -      | C    A    F    -
G    A    Bb   -      | A    F    -    -
C    C    Bb   -      | A    F    G    -
F    F    G    -      | F    F    -    -
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Shine All Year

(Tune: Joy to the World)

Key: D Major | Time Signature: 4/4 | Tempo: ~104 bpm

Verse 1
Shine to the world! The Lord has come!
Let every heart be bright;
Let homes and schools and city streets,
Show kindness, joy, and peace,
Show kindness, joy, and peace,
Show kindness, joy, and lasting peace!

Verse 2
He came with love that changes hearts,
To show the world God's grace.
So we will serve and gladly give,
With hope that shines through all,
With hope that shines through all,
With hope, with hope that shines through all.

Verse 3
No gift too small, no light too dim,
To push back fear and gloom.
The Savior reigns—so we will go,
And shine His light each day,
And shine His light each day,
And shine, and shine His light each day!

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D    E    F#   G    | A    B    A    G
F#   E    D    E    | F#   G    F#   E
D    B    D    E    | F#   G    A    B
B    A    G    F#   | E    D    -    -
B    A    G    F#   | E    D    -    -
B    A    G    A    | B    A    G    -
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Welcome Him In

(Tune: O Come, All Ye Faithful)

Key: G Major | Time Signature: 4/4 | Tempo: ~88 bpm

Verse 1
Come, all you weary, broken and searching,
Come to the place where mercy is born.
Christ stands with arms wide—calling every stranger.

Chorus
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Our Savior and Friend.

Verse 2
Born in a stable, humble and holy,
God's love has come to dwell here with us.
He knows our sorrow, walks beside the hurting.

Chorus
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Our Savior and Friend.

Verse 3
Open your table, open your doorway,
Give to the lost what Christ gave to you.
Love is the lantern—shining in the darkness.

Chorus
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Come let us welcome Jesus,
Our Savior and Friend.

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D    B    G    A    | G    A    B    -
D    B    G    A    | G    A    B    -
D    B    G    A    | G    F#   G    -

B    C    B    A    | G    -
B    C    B    A    | G    -
B    C    B    A    | G    -
G    A    G    -
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